

# **“The Struggle to Sell Survival”: Family Fallout Shelters and the Limits of Consumer Citizenship**

## **Abstract:**

In 1961 families across the United States witnessed the sudden growth of one of the most remarkable consumer products of the Cold War, the home fallout shelter. This article charts the rise and fall of domestic sales for home fallout shelters from the anticipated market boom in 1961 to bust by 1963. By investigating the growth in the number of shelter salesmen, the public backlash against their sales techniques, the growth of fly by night practitioners, and the eventual decline of the home shelter market, this article exposes the limitations of consumer capitalism in mobilizing and sustaining popular support for national security policy agendas.

We all know how deadly and devastating radioactive fallout is to every living thing. When our enemy attacks, what will you do? Have YOU as the head of your family made adequate preparations so that you and your loved ones will SURVIVE? You carry life insurance – What have you done about LIFE ASSURANCE?

- **Florida Survival Shelters, “A family needs a survival shelter to remain a family”, (21 September 1961)<sup>1</sup>**

Why the hell would I want to buy a tomb for the wife and kid?

- **Tom Baulk, Letter to the OCD (9 November 1961)<sup>2</sup>**

In September 1961, business for the fallout shelter salesman was booming. In the words of Frank F. Norton, owner of the Chicago-based home shelter manufacturing company Atomic Shelter Corporation, business had never been so good. ‘My best salesmen,’ Norton enthused to a reporter from *Time* magazine, ‘are named Khrushchev and Kennedy.’<sup>3</sup> Since President Kennedy’s call during the July 1961 Berlin Address for citizens to take the necessary steps to protect themselves and their families from a potential nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union, Norton, alongside scores of shelter suppliers across the United States, had been

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<sup>1</sup> Florida Survival Shelters, A family needs a survival shelter to remain a family, Sept. 21, 1961, box 27, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, Office of Civil Defense (OCD), Central Files 1961-1968, RG 397 (National Archives II, College Park, Maryland).

<sup>2</sup> Tom Baulk to Office of Civil Defense, Sep. 9, 1961, Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Jan-March, box 24, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968.

<sup>3</sup> “Boom to Bust,” *Time*, May. 18, 1962, 20.

inundated with inquiries from local residents requesting information about how to purchase and build family shelters in their own backyards and basements.<sup>4</sup> In Chicago, one branch of Sears Roebuck & Company recorded that during September 1961 an estimated four hundred shoppers visited their model home shelter exhibition each week. Meanwhile, Norton's cross-town rival Leo Hoegh, former director of the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization (OCDM) and now vice-president of the Wonder Building Corporation, claimed to be selling two hundred shelters a week.<sup>5</sup> In the autumn of 1961, as the Berlin Wall went up and the Soviet Union broke a moratorium on nuclear testing, it appeared that the fallout shelter salesman was primed to become the business success story of the decade.

With demand for family shelters at an all-time high, Frank Norton decided to invest in local advertising to make his product stand out in an increasingly congested marketplace. Running adverts in the *Chicago Tribune* throughout the fall and winter of 1961 and into the summer of 1962, Norton pitched nuclear protection directly to middle class home-owners: 'for just 200 dollars you too can have a fall-out shelter that you can enjoy!' Not only did Norton's Atomic Shelter Corporation offer 'affordable state of the art protection [that] every family needs,' Norton's shelters also had a 'dual purpose', providing 'a year-round room for you to pursue your favorite hobbies ... woodwork, photography you name it! ... Or just think of it as a den to escape the wife and kids.'<sup>6</sup> Norton's vision of Chicago's homeowners rushing

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<sup>4</sup> "Shelter Boom," *Newsweek* Sept. 18, 1962, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Letters from Frank Norton to the Office of Civil Defense are in box 6, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Correspondence Sep- Nov. 1961. Note that the correspondence back from the OCD to Norton are absent from the records.

<sup>6</sup> Clippings of the adverts were collected by Margaret Mead when researching her article "Are Shelter's the Answer," box I 104, The Papers of Margaret Mead (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.).

to buy his brand of family fallout shelter was exceptionally short-lived. Over the course of the next two years, an estimated six hundred shelter companies across the United States filed for bankruptcy.<sup>7</sup> By the end of 1962, Norton's firm had collapsed, after recording a year-end loss of over \$100,000. 'The market is now dead,' Norton informed *Time* magazine, 'the manufacturers have had it.'<sup>8</sup>

This article charts the rise and fall of domestic sales for home fallout shelters from the anticipated market boom in 1961 to bust by 1963. Through a close analysis of business records, trade publications, personal histories of salesmen, and consumer reactions, historians can observe the halting process through which government civil defense programs were outsourced to local business interests.<sup>9</sup> Scholarship on the family fallout shelter has flourished in recent decades, but historians have yet to truly engage with the political economies and complications of selling survival.<sup>10</sup> While historian David Monteyne's recent

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth D. Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York, 2001), 192.

<sup>8</sup> "Boom to Bust", *Time* May. 18, 1962, 20.

<sup>9</sup> For studies of consumer culture in the Cold War see Laura Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: US Propaganda and the Cold War* (Pennsylvania, 2008); Matthew W. Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society* (Massachusetts, 2013); Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism and American Culture* (New York, 2003); Lary May, *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (Chicago, 1989); Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Post-war America* (Chicago, 1992); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War 1945-61* (London, 1997). The centrality of business and the generation of capital around home shelters is overlooked in these works. For this history of the salesmen see Walter A. Friedman *Birth of a Salesmen: The Transformation of Selling in American* (Harvard, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988); Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Beings at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties* (Princeton, 2000); Joseph Masco, *Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico* (Princeton, 2006),

study discussed the significance of architects in designing fallout shelters closely with federal civil defense authorities, scholars have not considered an even more vital resource: the role of small-scale promoters, private businesses and individual sellers in shaping and delivering the policy of do-it-yourself survival to local audiences.<sup>11</sup>

By investigating the growth in the number of shelter salesmen, the public backlash against their techniques, and the decline of the market, this article reveals how commercial interests shaped the imperfect and personal ways private citizens engaged with the politics and practice of nuclear survival in their daily lives.<sup>12</sup> A study of the home shelter market exposes the limitations of consumer capitalism in mobilizing popular support for national security policy agendas. In plying their trade, shelter businesses attempted to marry two eminently successful ideological constructs of the Cold War era: national security with self-made, individualistic, consumer-based strategies, but ultimately demonstrated the limits of both. Over the course of an intense yet critical period in international tensions that culminated in the Cuban Missile Crisis, shelter salesmen became symbolic of the absurdity of nuclear war, the impossibility of survival and a perverse, opportunistic greed and ruthlessness that

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amongst many others, have written excellent studies on the role private shelters played in the Cold War imaginary, yet these excellent histories lack a comprehensive appreciation of the role of local business in of the civil defense.

<sup>11</sup> David Monteyne, *Fallout Shelter: Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War* (Minnesota, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> For discussions of the local Cold War see Jeffery Engel ed., *Local Consequences of the Global Cold War*, (Stanford, 2008). For local histories of the nuclear state see Gretchen Heefner, *The Missile Next Door: The Minuteman in the American Heartland* (Harvard, 2012); Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium disaster* (Oxford, 2013); Sarah Alisabeth, *Fox Downwind: A People's History of the Nuclear West* (Nebraska, 2014) and Linsey A Freeman, *The Atom Bomb in Me* (Stanford, 2019).

underpinned a particularly tasteless vision of Cold War capitalism.<sup>13</sup> Given the “opportunity” to purchase their families’ safety, citizens rejected the role of free market economics at a grassroots level, questioned the value of private protection over communal survival and altered how cultures of consumerism informed the politics of national security.

Despite breakthroughs in our understanding of the local Cold War, there remains a tendency among scholars to view civil defense as the ‘failed project’ of national security, with the family fallout shelter a ‘short lived national obsession’ that declined with the easing of nuclear tensions and emergence of détente following the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>14</sup> A study of shelter salesmen does not seek to dispute this claim, but rather adds a new dimension to our understanding of exactly why a nation of home shelter builders failed to materialize. Typically, when historians discuss state efforts to turn ‘every home into a fortress’ during the

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<sup>13</sup> Discussions of citizen-consumerism can be found in Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post War America* (New York, 2003), Sharon Zukin *Point of Purchase How Shopping Changed American Culture* (London, 2004) and Meg Jacobs *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton 2005).

<sup>14</sup> A note on periodization of the shelter craze. Historians frame the shelter craze as ‘short lived’ typically focus on the period of between the Berlin Crisis in 1961 to and the ending of atmospheric testing in 1963. Dee Garrison in *Bracing for Armageddon: Why Civil Defense Never Work* (Oxford, 2006), noted that these years represented the high point in national interest with the question of home shelter construction. Interestingly historians frame this period in in terms of a national ‘craze’, ‘obsession’ or ‘panic’. This view is supported by other prominent writes on national civil defense efforts, notably Margot Henriksen *Dr. Strangelove’s American: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (California, 1997) who described civil defense in terms of the ‘intense months of the bomb shelter craze’, 203 and Kenneth D. Rose *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York, 2001). Robert Jacobs *Dragon’s Tail: American’s Face The Atomic Age* (Massachusetts, 2010) argues that the end of atmospheric testing removed the visual presence of nuclear weapons from the American landscape and thus eased public concern over the question of survival.

early Cold War, they frame policies of do-it-yourself survival as being driven primarily by state actors.<sup>15</sup> In the words of historian Laura McEnaney, ‘policymakers clumsily escorted shelter policy towards the single-family home’.<sup>16</sup> While accurate, it is important to note that federal authorities were never truly alone in their efforts to encourage families to turn their basements and backyards into bomb shelters.

During the Cold War, the politics of home survival was defined by the rise of a new state-business nexus which saw private companies try, often unsuccessfully, to provide a critical link between the intentions of the federal authorities to normalize preparations for nuclear war and the actions of homeowners. In the words of Sarah Lichtman, the home fallout shelter is best understood as an ‘imagined design phenomenon’: both an ‘artefact’ that brought the logic of national security into the home, and a cultural ‘idea’, advertised through state propaganda, with the explicit aim of encouraging citizens to define ‘survival’ in terms of ‘safety, nationalism, consumption and the nuclear family’.<sup>17</sup> Family fallout shelters were not just an ‘artefact’ or ‘idea’, but consumer products, specified by the national security state and outsourced to private business interests looking to capitalize on government efforts to domesticate nuclear war.

The physical act of buying, building, and maintaining a family fallout shelter was not just public policy or a cultural talking point, but a site of consumer exchange. At the apex of Cold War tensions the politics and social practice of nuclear survival was dependent on the power of citizens as consumers to complete a transactional exchange and buy in, both

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<sup>15</sup> Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War* (Oxford, 1994), Andrew Grossman *Neither Red Nor Dead: Civil Defense and American Political Development* (Oxford, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah A. Lichtman *Do-It-Yourself Security: Safety, Gender, and the Home Fallout Shelter in Cold War America* *Journal of Design History*, Volume 19, Issue 1, 1 March 2006, 39–55

literally and figuratively, to a state sponsored illusion that purchasing a shelter might bring survival in the next war. It is remarkable that the persistent failure of private businesses to create and sustain a marketplace for home shelters has not played a more prominent role in how historians have characterized the limitations of militarization.<sup>18</sup> For Kenneth D. Rose, the reasons for public rejection of the home shelter were ‘complex,’ a mixture of ‘fatalism, apathy and skepticism.’<sup>19</sup> While correct in his observation, Rose overlooks the implications of public disdain for the consumer culture of home survival and its influence on the evolution of domestic nuclear security strategies. Over the rise and fall of the shelter market historians can observe a resounding shift away from private consumer based actions as a solution to geopolitical problems.

Sales, salesmanship, and the creation of profit were not afterthoughts in the development of civil defense – they were central to its social function. Asking homeowners how much they were willing to spend to ensure their families’ survival, shelter businesses and their salesmen pressed forward a vision of consumer capitalism that tied the purchasing power of private citizens to their ability to partake in the Cold War. By encouraging homeowners to buy, construct, and furnish their own family bunkers, shelter salesmen made the attainment of private profit a central and, as we will see, controversial platform for civic participation in national security. Scholars have emphasized the efforts of Cold War policymakers to spread ‘democratic capitalism’ both at home and abroad.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the story of

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<sup>18</sup> See Jacobs *Dragon’s Tail*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Rose, *One Nation Underground*, 220.

<sup>20</sup> The term ‘democratic capitalism’ is influenced by the writing of Laura Belmonte, *Selling the American Way*, 3-8, and chapter 4 ‘Selling Capitalism’. For discussions of business, capitalism and the Cold war see Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: 2006); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in*



shelter salesmen stand out as an anomaly. Discussing the evolution of the postwar consumer society, Lizabeth Cohen argues that a key aspect of the growth of the ‘Consumer Republic’ was the realization among both citizens and policymakers that ‘consumer interests and behavior had central economic and political consequences for American society’.<sup>21</sup> Cohen’s observation reverberates through the history of national security. Frequently accused by their customers of profiteering, warmongering, and exploiting the fears of the vulnerable, shelter salesmen represented an unwanted addition to Cold War marketplace. Questioning the validity of the product being sold and the trustworthiness of the person pitching it, homeowners challenged the citizen-consumer ideal that went hand-in-hand with the state sanctioned vision of privatized survival.

This article opens with the first inquiry into the commercial history of the family fallout shelter. Providing a chronological overview of the home fallout shelter business, it establishes the reasons behind the rise of the consumer market for home shelters during the 1950s and 1960s. Tracing the rise of shelter businesses into 1961 allows us to explore the network that emerged between state actors, regional suppliers, and local promoters. Doing so demonstrates how federal authorities attempted to create a consumer marketplace in which the selling of shelters advanced a model of economic citizenship that co-opted both citizens and local businessmen into the security state. Moving from the political to a cultural history of the shelter salesmen, the article then considers the sales pitches, advertisements, and

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*Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, 1994); Nicole Woolsey Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago, 1989), Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ, 2002); Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2013); and Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York, 2015).

motivations of shelter businesses and the salesmen who came to represent them. The second half explores how and why the capitalist ethos of home shelters manifested on a local level. By examining the interactions between shelter salesmen and their customers, this article closes by investigating the moral economy of the home shelter market. In doing so, I consider the reasons why shelter salesmen were considered the ‘racketeers’ of the Cold War, trace the decline of the market, and uncover in greater depth what happened to the businesses and the salesmen after the craze had ended.<sup>22</sup>

## The Commercialization of Survival

According to the *Saturday Review*, one of the shortest paths to wealth is the successful anticipation of a ‘national fad,’ and during the summer of 1961 the home fallout shelter was primed to become one of the most ‘demanded consumer products’ in Cold War America.<sup>23</sup> As Kennedy’s Berlin address ended, switchboards in local civil defense offices lit up.<sup>24</sup> Phone lines that had only received the occasional call in preceding years quickly jammed as worried citizens tried to reach a voice of authority that might tell them exactly how they were supposed to protect their families.<sup>25</sup> For Frank Fields, a 42-year old resident of Jacksonville Florida, the impact of the president’s televised address was immediate: ‘I had a

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<sup>22</sup> Helen Tangerines *Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (John Hopkins, 2003)

<sup>23</sup> “Shelters, Survival and Common Sense,” part 4, *Saturday Review*, 25 Nov. 15, 1961, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Reports from regional branches recall a sharp and quickly overwhelming number of requests for information and specifically copies of the 1960 *Family Fallout Shelter* construction manual. See Office Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, NAI

<sup>25</sup> Alice L. George, *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 59.

sinking realization of what building a shelter was going to cost'.<sup>26</sup> In living rooms and across dining room tables household finances were discussed and swift calculations made.<sup>27</sup> As Kennedy gathered his advisors in the Oval Office to debate the nuances of nuclear diplomacy, a parallel story developed in towns and shopping malls across the United States. Stepping into a potent mixture of public demand for information and overwhelmed civil defense officials, local businessmen across the nation decided to rebrand themselves as 'survival specialists' and set out to cajole potential customers into believing that survival might be an affordable option.

The business of buying and selling survival was not unique to 1961. Ever since the formation of Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) commercial interests have played a prominent role in the practice of domestic security.<sup>28</sup> The earliest account we have from a pioneer of home survival is the account of J.R Sanchez, from New York, who decided in 1954 to open the door to his own company LYN shelters. Sanchez never mentioned what inspired his new business venture, he did however make it abundantly clear what an 'entrepreneur from New York can bring to the table'.<sup>29</sup> In a remarkable set of correspondence written to his local civil defense board, Sanchez maintained that his unique contribution to

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<sup>26</sup> Frank Fields (10 November 1961), Box 1, Subject File: Correspondence Cards, Public Affairs Office Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, NAI.

<sup>27</sup> Letters and correspondent cards addressed to the Kennedy White House, the OCD, and local papers frequently dwelt on the financial implications of shelter construction. Take for example Fred Hunt who wrote to his local paper discussing in length the argument he had with his wife over the fact that buying or financing a shelter might mean not picking up a new television. This sort of commodity balancing between "survival" and "luxury" informed the actions of shelter salesmen. See *Sarasota News* October 5<sup>th</sup> 1961, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Laura McEnaney, *Civil defense beings at home*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from J.R. Sanchez (4 May 1954), Records of the Office of Emergency Preparedness, FCDA Publications, 1950- 1960, RG395, Box 2, NAI, 1.

the Cold War was his background and ‘experience in retail ... people trust what I am selling. I always make commission.’ Sanchez actively sought to forge a partnership with FCDA authorities, claiming that what they truly needed was ‘good salesmen ... accurate and eager’.<sup>30</sup> Even at this early stage, Sanchez’s letters reflected a nascent concern that over the next few years grew even more pronounced, notably that the key to selling survival resided in the authenticity of the message. ‘I can present “the survival story,”’ Sanchez noted, ‘in its true dramatic manner ... my job, plain and simple, is to help make this a personal experience.’<sup>31</sup> Travelling through New York State with his ‘all–Aluminum trailer’, LYN shelters were ‘happily endorsed’ by federal authorities, with the director of the FCDA Val Peterson noting that Sanchez’s and his shelters were ‘the perfect mobile vehicle for educating the public about the ease of home survival’.<sup>32</sup> Each model came as a ‘completely self-contained unit, including its own gasoline operated electric generator, Public Address System, and all important reception area for guests’. LYN shelters simplified the message of domestic survival by creating a mobile product, ‘geared,’ in the words of Sanchez, to ‘illustrate just how simple survival really is for the average Joe out there!’<sup>33</sup>

From 1958 to 1961, a steady stream of commercial actors and small-scale promoters followed in Sanchez’s footsteps. Under Eisenhower’s watch, the FCDA, now rebranded as the Office of Civil and Defense and Mobilization (OCDM), set out to strike a balance between fiscal responsibilities and the easing of national anxiety over growing Soviet

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from J.R. Sanchez to Val Peterson (17 August 1956), Records of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, Val Peterson Executive Correspondence, August – September 1956, RG395, Box 2, NAI, 1

<sup>32</sup> Letter from J. Val Peterson to J.R. Sanchez (23 August 1956), Records of the FCDA, Val Peterson Executive Correspondence, August – September 1956, RG395, Box 2, NAI,

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 4.

technological power following the surprise launch of Sputnik in 1957 by encouraging civil defense efforts away from public projects and towards do-it-yourself survival.<sup>34</sup> Advertising the family shelter as ‘the quintessential home improvement exercise’, the OCDM turned towards small scale promoters to help mass-market a vision of home survival.<sup>35</sup> Over the next three years the OCDM produced a steady stream of pamphlets, posters and public exhibitions all aimed at selling do-it-yourself survival.<sup>36</sup> While the practice of home shelter construction remained decidedly imperfect, with a host of technical questions left unanswered, the OCDM put forth a strikingly coherent message, that homes and families with private shelters had a better chance of surviving the next war than those without them.

The years from 1958 to 1961 saw contractors, manufacturers, promoters and trade associations working hand-in-hand with federal civil defense officials. The commercialization of the family shelter during this time is best described as a process of network building as policymakers worked with industrial suppliers, manufacturers, and designers. Materials, shelter blueprints, capital, and experience flowed, if at times imperfectly, between policymakers, manufacturers, suppliers, and promoters. Whilst the

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<sup>34</sup> Reaction to the Soviet Satellite- A Preliminary Evaluation, White House Office of Staff Research, Box 35, Special Project: Sputnik, Missiles, and Related Matters and Summary of Discussion, 339<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council October 10, 1957 concerning “*Implications of the Soviet Earth Satellite for U.S. Security*” and “*Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM) Programs*” dated 11 October 1957, DDE Papers of the President, NSC Series, Box 9, 339<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, NAI.

<sup>35</sup> For the complete discussion of Civil Defense and FHA loans see Civil Defense: General, 1961: January – March, Papers of the President, National Security Files, JFKL.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Grossman has estimated that during the 1950s alone 500,000 million pieces of civil defence literature aimed at embedding a doctrine of ‘self-help’ at both community and national level. See Grossman in *Neither Red Nor Dead*, 158.

variety and scope of the commercial network of civil defense varied depending on the region, the basic relationship between industrial suppliers, designers, and promoters remained unchanged. At the mass-manufacturing stage of the product, federal authorities worked closely with a number of leading trade associations, ranging from the American Concrete Pipe Association (ACPS) to the National Lumber Manufacturers Association (NLMA) and Asbestos Cement Product Association (ACPA).<sup>37</sup> Complicit in the selling of survival, these trade associations developed a strong collaborative partnership with civil defense officials, and defense architects working for the American Institute of Architects (AIA), to help design model fallout shelters to be approved internally before being franchised out to regional dealers at a local level.<sup>38</sup>

Built from their own materials and sold by their local suppliers, manufacturing companies and OCDM officials invested in the standardization of their product, in turn creating small regional monopolies. For example, the steel needed to build the seventy three prefabricated walls that made up the Kelsey Hayes' home shelter was supplied by Armco Steel in Ohio working with American Steel and Iron Association (ASIA), before finally being sold by a regional supplier, James Byrne of Michigan, who at least in theory, had control over

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<sup>37</sup> Trade Associations working with the OCD were printed on the back cover of civil defense pamphlets and shelter construction booklets. *Fallout Protection: What to Know and Do About Nuclear Attack* Government Printing Office, December 1961 lists eight official associations working with the OCD under the 'more information is available section'.

<sup>38</sup> The joint authored Department of Defense and OCD booklet *Family Shelter Design* (Government Printing Office, 1961) lists eight shelter designs each linked to a specific material provided by one of the endorsed trade associations. The Belowground New Construction Clay Masonry Shelter was designed and built with materials from National Concrete Masonry Association.

Kelsey Hayes sales in Oakland County.<sup>39</sup> Families looking to buy a Kelsey Hayes' shelter then had the option to approach a local saving firms who offered financing options.<sup>40</sup> Product control and cooperation between political and capital interest was integral to the integration of civil defense into the grassroots, as private consumption and homeownership combined with patriotism, market trust, and federal control to turn survival into a domestic commodity.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Family in the Shelter, Snug, Equipped and Well Organized," *Life Magazine*, Sept. 15, 1961, 105.

Details on Armco Steel can be found in: box 1, Public Affairs Office Subject 1960-1961.

<sup>40</sup> The FHA proposed that those wanting to apply for supported finance to build their shelter might do so in three ways. Firstly, for those more intrepid shelter builders looking for 'comprehensive rehabilitation' of existing homes Sections 203(k) and 200(h) of the home loan program now offered a path towards family survival. Projects that qualified for the 203(k) and 200(h) financing often fell under 'substantial home improvement task', applied to dilapidated homes that needed foundation work, or if extensive remodeling was required. The scale of the task meant that blueprints of the planned construction work were to be provided ahead of time and inspection from the FHA once the site was complete. The second option was 'refinancing their home through existing FHA mortgages' to pay for a shelter. The third option was for families to look to Title I of the property improvement loan, with domestic fallout shelters falling under 'home improvement' with shelters framed as 'dual purpose' rooms that might double up with the expansion into a new room.

<sup>41</sup> "Boom to Bust", *Time* May. 18, 1962, 20.



**Figure 1: Civil Defense Inspection Bayonne New Jersey 1958**

The nearly completed prototype basement fallout shelter is viewed by local, State and Federal Civil Defense Officials. Contractors and industries that donated time and materials to the building of the shelter included: Nora Construction Company, Revegno-Hall, Inc., Woodward Lumber Co., Carpenter Local 486, U.S. Naval Supply Center, Food Fair Stores, Inc., Daitch Shopwell Stores, Rosenberg's Hardware, Johnson and Johnson and Allied Equipment and Supply Co.

Faith in shelters as a product went hand-in-hand with consumer confidence in the credibility of local promoters. While federal officials working with the AIA specified the product and trade associations provided the material, shelter salesmen added what *Newsweek* described as 'part showbiz, part peep show and hard sell' to the message of do-it-yourself survival.<sup>42</sup> Just as the national pattern of nuclear survival filtered responsibility away from the state and onto the shoulders of the suburban family, a similar pattern emerged within the consumer politics of civil defense. If it was the civic duty of families to purchase and construct shelters, it was the task of the salesmen to match the product to the needs and wants of their customers.

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<sup>42</sup> "Civil Defense: Who'd Survive," *Newsweek*, Aug. 7, 1961, 48.



Salesmen, and the sales techniques they deployed, acted as the final step in a long process that had originated in the offices of civil defense planners, travelled down through trade associations, industrial suppliers, local financial institutions, and finally into the hands of small-scale promoters. Selling family shelters required a striking level of coordination between state and commercial actors. For example, Kelsey Hayes, a wheel and brake manufacturer and now shelter seller, frequently cited itself in local marketing campaigns as ‘reputable’, primarily by proudly claiming that their shelters were: ‘OCD Approved,’ ‘FHA financed,’ ‘can withstand a house collapsing’ and had been ‘featured in *Life*.’<sup>43</sup> To ensure the “quality” of their product, Kelsey Hayes strictly controlled who might be able to make a profit out of their franchises. Local sales agents were interviewed by Hayes and tested on their ‘experience and credit rating’ before being permitted to obtain a regional dealership.<sup>44</sup> So close was the dependency of policymakers on private businesses that OCDM officials happily endorsed an advert from a Baltimore based Formstone Company that told customers to ‘call your local civil defense office or us for all the details on how to survive an atomic attack.’<sup>45</sup> The collaboration between policymakers, trade associations and small scale promoters created a formalized marketplace in which economic exchange, capital growth and potential profit was carefully controlled by the federal authorities at almost every step, with the aim of accruing credibility in the home shelter program.

The conditions were set for the market to thrive. The month after the July Berlin Address, the FHA offered financing options for home shelters, allowing families to refinance

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<sup>43</sup> Kelsey Hayes advertisement can be found in local papers during 1961 and 1962 often limited to stories of new franchise that were modeling shelters. See. *The Daily Journal*, New Jersey 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1961 15; *Democrat and Chronicle* Rochester New York, 15<sup>th</sup> October 1961 85; *Detroit Free Press* 8<sup>th</sup> October, 1961 42.

<sup>44</sup> *Pensacola News*, Florida, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1961, 16.

<sup>45</sup> *The Evening Sun* Baltimore 31<sup>st</sup> August 1961, 45.

their homes for shelters costing up to \$10,000.<sup>46</sup> In September, a highly publicized issue of *Life* dedicated to the family fallout shelter opened with a letter from President Kennedy and contained a full page advertisement for a Kelsey Hayes shelter.<sup>47</sup> Expectations for the newly emerging home shelter market were high, with one Congressional leader going as far as to predict that shelter manufacturers and sellers alike were soon to ‘achieve the magnitude and respect’ of other federally promoted programs such as ‘highway building and urban renewal.’<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Home loans were not actually funded directly by the FHA, but are instead a guarantee that the loan will be repaid in the case the borrower defaults. The rules for the inclusion of shelter improvements in FHA policies are detailed in several places. Full details of the FHA loans including the changing regulations over 1961- 1962 see *Civil Defense, 1962: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, Eighty-Seventh Congress, Second Session: Part II, Appendixes Committee on Government Operations* (U.S: Government Printing Office, 1962), 366. The details of the FHA regulations were also carried in local newspapers reporting on the new regulations to financing options: see HUD Aids for Fallout Shelter, *U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development Vol 59* 1962.

<sup>47</sup> *Life Magazine*, Sept. 15, 1961, 105.

<sup>48</sup> House Subcommittee on the Committee on Government Operations, *Civil Defense*, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess. (1961), 20.



**Figure 2: Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization exhibit at a local civil defense fair (1960)**

Yet, steadily over the course of the next two years, federal authorities lost control over the market that they themselves created. Trade publications published during through the fall and into winter of 1961 detail local contractors, construction firms, real estate companies, and even car dealers rebranding their existing businesses by quickly opening new branches dedicated to selling survival.<sup>49</sup> From July to December of 1961, the number of OCD approved regional civil defense distributions selling shelter franchises increased from 51 to 351.<sup>50</sup> Yet the number of firms listed by OCD records as operating under the guise of survival

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<sup>49</sup> *Popular Mechanics* October 1961; *Business History* Sep. 1961 *California Highways and Public Works* November 1961, *Consumer Reports* 1961 and 1962.

<sup>50</sup> *The Morning Call* 24<sup>th</sup> December 1961 79.

specialists reached well into the thousands.<sup>51</sup> In California, the newly branded construction company ‘Nuclear Survival Corp.’ opened its doors to patrons in July of 1961 without any federal oversight, shortly followed in the same week by ‘Peace-O-Mind Shelter Co.’ in Texas, ‘Survival-All Inc.’ in Ohio, ‘Survival Construction Specialist’ in Denver, and ‘Diamond Blocks’ in Boston, to name a just few.<sup>52</sup> The sudden influx of shelter ventures is staggering. In New Jersey, the Attorney General David Furman issues a statement remaining residents to stay ‘vigilant against the sudden influx of “fly-by nighters,” seeking to exploit the current situation’.<sup>53</sup> Furman had a point. In Atlanta, *Newsweek* reported that during the first week in September 1961 ‘thirty shelter firms had been created’ with ‘three small advertisements in local papers resulting in five thousand inquiries’.<sup>54</sup> None of these new firms were OCD approved.

The story of small-scale local promoters’ retro-fitting pre-existing trading practices and selling products far outside of OCD approved specifications demonstrates the staggering speed with which the buying and selling of survival escalated out of state control. While sections of these rebranded businesses did seek federal approval for their new ranges of home shelters, others went about designing and displaying their own model shelters which bore little resemblance to OCD regulations.<sup>55</sup> In Las Vegas, the swimming pool company ‘Vegas Pools’ decided to rebrand themselves as the ‘Fox Hole Shelter Company’ in November of

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<sup>51</sup> Briefing papers Stewart Pittman, June. 9, 1961, FTC 3 Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD Central Files 1961-1968, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.,4

<sup>53</sup> “Shelter Gyps Held Likely” *The Courier News*, 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 1961, 8.

<sup>54</sup> “Must We Dig?” *Newsweek* October, 1961, 24.

<sup>55</sup> In 1961 the Office of Civilian Defense and Mobilization was reformed into the Office of Civil Defense (OCD).

1961, and simply flipped an old swimming pool design upside down, claiming it was a shelter.<sup>56</sup> Michigan's 'most successful home realtor' opened its doors to a brand new 'Fallout Division' in October, writing to local OCD officials for approval for shelter designs that bore little resemblance to the trade association sanctioned models.<sup>57</sup>

In Philadelphia one customer complained to authorities that the shelter he had been sold, and partially built before noticing the mistake, had been designed without any ventilation or air filter.<sup>58</sup> In Portland, building regulations meant all structures needed to have windows installed, rendering OCD guidelines moot and leaving customers to contemplate the wisdom of a local salesman pitching them a model shelter with a 'window through which to watch the mushroom cloud'.<sup>59</sup> In Southern California, one local manufacturer went as far as to offer a shelter that doubled as a space of fun and relaxation and claimed, incorrectly, that it was 'OCD Approved'. The shelter in question made a unique design choice of dividing the shelter into two sections: one half a swimming pool and the second half a fallout shelter with a 'glass window to take pictures of the swimmers'. While we can question how effectively the swim survival setup may have worked, the advertisement made it clear that any homeowner now had a space suitable 'if the weather, or the war, gets hot'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> "Re: Ellis, Frank Consultations" (April 5 1961), Box 3, RG396, Central HQ Operational Files Publicity Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, NAI, 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Morning Call* 10<sup>th</sup> November 1961, 13.

<sup>58</sup> Unknown author (4 July 1961), Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Sep-Oct, Box 24, RG397, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968, NAI, 4.

<sup>59</sup> *The Eugene Guard Oregon* 12<sup>th</sup> October 1961 p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Beckley Post Herald* 15<sup>th</sup> July 1962, 40.

## Enter the Survival Merchants

The rise of shelter companies working outside of OCD control invites the question, who exactly were these new survival specialists? Time spent consulting the records of private businesses, federal correspondences, and regional records of the OCD indicate that there was no “typical” shelter salesman. Experience, background, and business careers before and after the shelter craze varied greatly between individual salesmen. Nevertheless, there are still some insights to draw out over what compelled individuals to join the ranks of the new survival merchants.

Despite popular perceptions, not all shelter businesses and salesmen were ‘out to make a quick buck’. Letters written to local OCD offices, often from those companies representing OCD and trade association approved regional suppliers, speak of a more complex drive to sell fallout shelters that included both profit and a sense of ‘community service’.<sup>61</sup> ‘It has not happened yet’, recalled Indiana based shelter salesman Evan Rosenbaum, ‘but we have all reason to believe it might. The President takes survival seriously and so do we’.<sup>62</sup> Working on behalf of the National Concrete Masonry Association (NCMA) as a self-described, ‘reliable and reputable’ home builder, Rosenbaum opened the doors of ‘Atlas Shelters’ in September of 1961 to offer Indianapolis residents a clear pathway to engage with the domestic practice of civil defense.<sup>63</sup> By purchasing his skills as an ‘expert builder for \$1000’, residents had the opportunity to support a local business and have their family’s safety ensured by someone they, in theory, could trust to do a good job.<sup>64</sup> In

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<sup>61</sup> Evan Rosenbaum to OCD 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1961, Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Sep-Oct, Box 24, RG397, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968, NAIL, 1-2

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

procuring Rosenbaum's services, residents fulfilled their roles as consumers of civil defense and participated in the economic exchange that resided at the heart of do-it-yourself survival.

For residents of Indianapolis, Rosenbaum and his Atlas Shelters were, for a brief time, a focal point for civic engagement with the local Cold War. Every successful shelter built, was meticulously covered in the *Indianapolis Star* as Rosenbaum became a small-town human interest story.<sup>65</sup> Rosenbaum was not alone in his belief that selling shelters offered his local community a vital service. Frank Hopkins, a one-time plywood seller, now a fully-fledged Sacramento shelter salesman, noted in a 1961 letter to President Kennedy that he was 'proud to offer his neighbors the opportunity to survive the next war'.<sup>66</sup> Without an apparent sense of irony, Hopkins expressed his thanks to the President for offering his local business a chance to 'help folks around here stand up to the Soviet Union'. For Hopkins, the decision to refashion his skills from car dealer to shelter salesman contributed to the survival of the nation he 'love[d] dearly'.<sup>67</sup> The personal motivations that drove some individuals to sell shelters was not simply the effort to generate profit but to sustain their communities during a time of war. Here, the local dynamics of the national security state were shaped by the surprising level of autonomy small-scale businesses had in choosing how nuclear survival was presented to the community. Local promoters had the freedom to choose how their shelters were advertised, pitched, and priced. For better or worse, businesses played a vital role in cultivating local engagement with the Cold War.

While, Hopkins and Rosenbaum decided to sell their products out of a desire to protect their communities, far more common are accounts of individual salesmen responding

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<sup>65</sup> *Indianapolis Star* 24 Oct 1961, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Frank Hopkins, November 1961, Box 24, RG397, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, 1961-1968, NAI, 1-2

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

to advertisements in local papers claiming that in the age of nuclear war selling shelters was ‘a real money maker’.<sup>68</sup> Appearing frequently in the pages of local business sections of small town newspapers during 1961 and 1962, ‘help wanted’ advertisements called for individuals who had the ability to ‘close deals’ to join their ranks and take part in the anticipated shelter boom.<sup>69</sup> With the promise of high commission, training in the basics of atomic science, and the chance to get in at the ground level of an “exciting” new market, these wanted advertisements hint towards profit, rather than anxieties over national survival driving this recruitment. In November of 1961 Mr. Olson of Pennsylvania Avenue, Minneapolis who had recently opened a new ‘Fallout Division’ of his real estate company, advertised an ‘outstanding opportunity to well groomed, experienced men of proven ability to sell America’s finest shelter’.<sup>70</sup> It is not clear whether Mr. Olson managed to hire his well-groomed men, but it is apparent that he set out to appeal to the commercial interests of his applicants. In Boston, General Survival Corp. informed interested parties that life as a shelter salesman offered ‘unlimited profits and exclusive regional coverage.’<sup>71</sup> In Chicago, the Protect-All shelter company asked for ‘ambitious and assertive salesmen looking for high commission’ to join their ranks.<sup>72</sup>

Obtaining a high commission and fulfilling the promise of ‘unlimited profits’ required shelter salesmen to stimulate consumer demand for the products they sold. While the sales pitch often failed, the efforts of sellers to manoeuvre homeowners into making a financial

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<sup>68</sup> Salesmen: To Sell Fallout Shelters” *The Cincinnati Enquire* October 30<sup>th</sup> 1961, 40.

<sup>69</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, November 7<sup>th</sup> 1961, 56; *The Tennessean* October 30<sup>th</sup> 1961 22; Fort Lauderdale News, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1961, 22.

<sup>70</sup> *Star Tribune* November 1961 10<sup>th</sup> November 1961, 29.

<sup>71</sup> *Boston Globe* 4<sup>th</sup> September, 1961 72.

<sup>72</sup> *Chicago Tribune* 8<sup>th</sup> October, 1961 90.



commitment to home survival required the development of sales strategies that overcame the doubt and dismissal of the buyers they encountered. As such, shelter salesmen developed sales techniques and local marketing campaigns that informed potential buyers about the function of shelters to persuade them that their products were of a high quality, and in some cases, even luxurious.

In early 1950s civil defense literature, the act of building a shelter was framed as a quasi-military function for the post-war family, a so-called necessity of the nuclear age that gave rise to and privileged a narrative of Cold War domesticity in which families actively participated on the home front as both soldiers and civilians. At the height of the shelter craze, salesmen adopted a new tactic in their advertisements, softening the rhetoric of survival by actively pitching the act of shelter construction not simply as an act of family protection but as a task in which any post-war family wishing to improve their home might participate. ‘You are building a shelter and you are building a hobby room!’ shelter salesman Thomas Edwards wrote in the *Kansas Star* in 1959.<sup>73</sup> This sentiment was echoed by the American Institute of Decorators (AID) in their three-page advertisement, ‘designing for defiance’ in 1960. According to these adverts, the construction of a ‘fallout shelter is not just about doing all you can to protect your family,’ the act of building a family shelter was a ‘home improvement exercise’ that also provided a room that might ‘double as an extra activity area for fun and relaxation.’<sup>74</sup> The family fallout shelter was not solely a ‘nuclear bunker,’ but was for ‘daily use’ as a ‘hobby room, music room, or recreation room.’<sup>75</sup> Shelter advertisements made the remarkable claim that the act of family protection was not all doom

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<sup>73</sup> “Shelter Sale,” *Kansas Star* 5<sup>th</sup> March 1962 13.

<sup>74</sup> American Institute of Decorators collected, box 2, Public Affairs Office Subject 1958-1960, 1.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

and gloom, but was an experience that homeowners might enjoy. As one Wisconsin based shelter tradesman was reported as saying in 1961, shelter owners will be able to ‘bring the buddies round ... play some hands of poker ... show off to the neighbors.’<sup>76</sup>

The message in shelter adverts was clear. The homeowner who bought a fallout shelter was not just a good citizen but also fulfilled a personal desire to consume, to make the domestic space more appealing and to affirm their patriotism through the act of safeguarding their family.<sup>77</sup> As one salesman stated to passing trade during the 1961 Chicago Home Furnishing Market exhibit, personal shelters allowed homeowners to ‘battle the commies’ whilst also ‘waiting out radiation danger in pleasure and comfort, and relaxation.’ In the words of a Michigan based designer and seller of home survival products, ‘why shouldn’t the end of the world be comfortable?’<sup>78</sup>

The art of selling survival was also informed by the training received before hitting the road. Again, the training offered varied with the companies, with those working for trade associations frequently engaging with civil defense booklets and educational material while other companies felt free to take more of a creative license by curating their own training material. Common practice, however, was the use of printed photographic slides that depicted various shelter models that needed to be studied and flip cards with key facts about shelter

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<sup>76</sup> Quoted in a memo to Stewart Pittman, Nov. 10, 1961, box 1 Accounting and Finance, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, 1961-1968.

<sup>77</sup> “You Can Build a Low-Cost Shelter Quickly,” *Popular Mechanics* (December 1961), 85-89. *Popular Mechanics* provided guidelines on outdoor and indoor shelter construction in addition to instructions on how to maintain shelter air filters and antennas.

<sup>78</sup> Mark Finn to OCD Oct. 9, 1961, Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Sep-Oct, box 24, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968.

price points to be memorized.<sup>79</sup> Shelter flip cards, collected in part by local OCD officials, often contained memorable sayings from politicians, key statistics on the likelihood of survival drawn from the pages of popular magazines, and in some cases even fabricated by the salesmen. The sheer amount of misinformation that sales pitches brought to potential buyers is staggering. ‘Make no mistake! Family Fallout Protection is a serious business,’ claimed Pottstown, Pennsylvania based Family Fallout Shelters Inc., ‘investigate before you buy and get the facts from us!’ The facts in question, which included a range of up to fifteen models, including a shelter made from almost entirely plywood, demonstrates quite clearly just how tenuously the facts might be stretched to secure a sale.<sup>80</sup>

Sales brochures, a primary prop carried by hand for doorway interactions, also provided the basis for sales pitches. Howard Shaw, founder of Survive-All Shelters of Columbus Ohio, a company that reverted to Hollywood Pool Inc. a week after the Cuban Missile Crisis, provided his salesmen with a shelter booklet he had produced in partnership with the Mort Kridel Advertising Agency. The brochure opened with a letter he had written himself that offered the basis of the sales pitch that followed. The sales pitch for Survive-All Shelters was a composite picture created from cultural and political references to create a common ground for sales interaction. *On the Beach* (1957) appears alongside discussions in *Life* and prominent supporters of civil defense, notably New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Dr. Edward Teller. The act of purchasing a shelter is made familiar and

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<sup>79</sup> “Request for interview” 10 November 1961, Subject File: Correspondence Cards, Public Affairs Office Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, Office of Civil Defense, NAIL, 2; ‘Salesmen in training’ Request for booklet *Fallout Protection: What to Know and Do about Nuclear Attack*” 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1962), Subject File: Correspondence Cards, Public Affairs Office Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, NAIL, p1.

<sup>80</sup> *The Mercury Pottstown*, 14<sup>th</sup> October 1961, 20.

relatable, but is also undercut with the constant chiding that the ‘customer must not be afraid to confront the issue at hand’.<sup>81</sup>

Price also played a role in the sales negotiation. Typically, shelters cost anywhere from the suspiciously low \$150 into the tens of thousands of dollars for a multiple deluxe room shelter complex.<sup>82</sup> Price gave salesmen the option to upsell their product. Survival All and Shelter Inc. sales brochures displayed a range of options from ‘basic models’ that claimed to offer all the ‘necessities of survival’, to luxury models that were spacious, equipped with rugs or boasted ‘expensive indoor paneling’.<sup>83</sup> While working for Fallout Shelter Co., Robert Ambley noted that if his buyers balked at the initial cost of purchasing a shelter, then a range of financing options and a ‘lowering of costs might be discussed if it meant closing a sale’. If a customer agreed that a shelter was a necessary purchase, then it made sense to Ambley to encourage buyers to spend a little more to make their spaces as ‘impressive and comfortable as possible’. ‘After all’, Ambley noted, ‘war or not, it’ll make a pretty dandy extra room at a price you can afford.’<sup>84</sup> These sales pitches, designed to overcome any potential reluctance of the buyer, started a dialogue between salesmen and customers over the practicality of survival. As shelter salesmen went about knocking on doors and setting up displays, they soon found themselves facing a growing public backlash.

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<sup>81</sup> Survive All- Shelters have been discussed on the Conlerad website and in Box 2 Information and Public 1960-1961, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, NAI.

<sup>82</sup> Price points varied greatly for shelters. For example, in an article ‘Fallout Shelters For Sale- Cheap’ *The Anniston Star* 12<sup>th</sup> April 1962, 24 listed a model for \$150 that provided basic materials for self-assembly while the *Morning Herald* 25<sup>th</sup> July 1962 33, spoke of luxury models ranging well into the \$10,000s dollars.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Ambley 5<sup>th</sup> December 1961 Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Nov-Dec, Box 24, RG397, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968, NAI,

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, advert also appeared in the *Cincinnati Enquire* July 22 1962 48.

## The Struggle to Sell Survival

According to *Consumer Report*, the total number of home fallout shelter assembly kits sold between 1961 and 1962 was 200,000.<sup>85</sup> This figure can be queried, especially considering the reported incidents of homeowners keeping shelters ‘secret’ from both their neighbors and the authorities.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, the estimated 200,000 shelter kits sold to a population of 180 million illustrates a fundamental truth about civil defense during the early Cold War, namely that the majority of the American public, when faced with the opportunity to purchase, construct and furnish their own shelters, refused to do so. For the analysts of *Consumer Report*, the commercial failure of shelters was down to the product itself: ‘Fallout shelters of the type widely proposed to date’, the director at *Consumer Report* argued, are too ‘costly and complex in their requirements [oxygen supply, water, power, heat, food, sanitary arrangements] ... limited and unreliable in usefulness... dependent on variants and unknowns.’<sup>87</sup> Yet, recorded testimonies of salesmen tell a complex story of failed expectations, declining profits, and an American public trying to make sense of a federal policy that encouraged homeowners to take survival into their own hands.

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<sup>85</sup> “Enter the Survival Merchants,” *Consumer Report*, 27, no.1 (1962), 47. Details on how many shelters were constructed have long been difficult for historians to fully uncover. Partly because shelters were kept secret, or only partial constructed, or else never recorded by the OCD. The most accurate reports therefore come from the FHA approval records for shelters than had been financed, inspected and constructed. For this figures range from around 950, in September, 1,224 in October and 894 in November 1961. See *House Reports of the Congressional Serial Series of the United States: Public Documents* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), 46.

<sup>86</sup> Arthur I Waskow, “The Shelter Society: A report of a Peace Research Institute Conference on Potential Implications of a National Civil Defense Program” Jan. 13-14, 1962, box I 104.

<sup>87</sup> “Enter the Survival Merchants,” *Consumer Report*, 27, no.1, (1962), 47.

The experience of shelter salesmen illustrates that the quality and cost of the product was just one factor among several interlocking reasons that explain why American consumers rejected backyard bunkers. ‘One guy shouted at me – actually *shouted*,’ Steven Heck, a sales representative for Michigan based Gricar-Anderson shelters recalled, ‘don’t you know that the more shelters we have the more likely someone is about to start a war? Why do you do this to us?’<sup>88</sup> Far from being received with ‘magnitude and respect’, salesmen were often seen as an unwanted intrusion, exploiting private citizens and making a profit out of community fear.

One thing that is abundantly clear from the records of shelter companies is that the failure of fallout shelter firms was not due to a shortage of curious patrons. Shelter salesmen noted that the public remained interested in their product, though the public were often far more attracted to the consumer spectacle of the home fallout shelter than the product itself. James Cline, the manager of a lumber company in Royal Oak, Michigan like many of the owners of newly emerging shelter companies in 1961, decided to turn his hand to selling survival after reading *Life*’s fallout shelter special issue in September of 1961. Cline was struck by ‘the elegant design’ and the ‘ease’ with which Art and his son Claude had constructed their own shelter.<sup>89</sup> With little technical or design experience of his own, Cline struck up a regional dealership with the Detroit based Kelsey Hayes, the company whose model prefabricated steel shelter was featured heavily in *Life*. Constructing a Kelsey Hayes’ shelter in his lumberyard and advertising shelter assembly kits at \$725, Cline was initially shocked by the volume of people visiting his display. 2,500 shoppers walked through, viewed

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<sup>88</sup> Steven Heck to OCD, Nov. 10, 1961, box 1, Subject File: Correspondence Cards, Public Affairs Office Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD.

<sup>89</sup> Alfred Balk, “Anyone for Survival?” *Saturday Evening Post*, March.27, 1965, 74.

and discussed the home shelter display over an eight-week period.<sup>90</sup> Yet only one shelter was purchased. Not only facing a commercial disaster, Cline stated that members of his own community in the Royal Oaks were far from happy with his new business venture. ‘People were confused, frightened, angry,’ Cline recalled, ‘I was accused of profiteering, war-mongering – you name it.’ For the people of Royal Oak, Cline represented the idea that nuclear war might come to their community and, more appallingly, that survival the next war had a price tag.<sup>91</sup>

James Cline’s experience was by no means unique. Recorded incidents of public disdain for shelter salesmen litter public testimonies.<sup>92</sup> The varied response to shelter sales pitch shows us the inherent contradictions of civil defense as a capitalist venture. Even when homeowners did set out to follow the civic expectations of civil defense it turned out that the physical act of shelter construction was no easy feat. In social histories of the Cold War the creation and maintenance of domestic spaces such as garages, workshops, and barbecue pits have typically been framed as a means to affirm conventional ideas of masculinity in an increasingly suburbanized world.<sup>93</sup> In the words of Steven Gelber, American men in the aftermath of WWII sought to forge ‘a domestic masculine identity’ through do-it-yourself home activities that created a male space in the suburban home while simultaneously

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>91</sup> “Survival of the fewest,” White House Central Files, box 597; Norman Cousins, “Shelter, Survival and Common Sense,” *Saturday Review*, Oct. 21, 1961, 26.

<sup>92</sup> These records are stored in and amongst letters from shelter builders in: Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Jan-March, Boxes 1-12, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968.

<sup>93</sup> See for example Michael Kimmel, “Temporary About Myself: White-Collar Conformist and Suburban Playboys, 1945-1960” in *Manhood in America* (Oxford, 2005), 223-258 and Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood* (Chicago, 1997).

allowing men to ‘actively participate in family activities.’<sup>94</sup> However, in the case of the local experiences of fallout shelter salesmen, the narrative of domestic masculinity, dominant in the marketing culture of civil defense, becomes complicated and muddled. Rather than the ‘man-of-action’ consumer that Holt and Thompson contend underpinned the portrait of masculinity in post-war male consumption, potential fallout shelter owners appear from public correspondence as confused, incompetent, and skeptical.<sup>95</sup> John Boyd, a father from Oklahoma writing to the OCD in July of 1961, recalled his experience with a shelter salesman: ‘if I build a shelter, if it even works, then what? I ask the sales guy this very question. He just shrugged and told me “better than doing nothing at all” I didn’t trust him; the whole thing left a bad taste in my mouth.’<sup>96</sup> ‘Why would I take out a loan to bury my family underground,’ Boston father Jake Willis commented when writing to the OCD in October of 1961, ‘what sort of father would do that?’<sup>97</sup> Far from affirming domestic masculinity and federal messages of domestic survival, the family shelter was, for many, a grim reminder of their vulnerability and impotence.

The narrative of Cline and potential customers such as Boyd and Willis indicate public unease with the transaction of buying a shelter. Yet it is also necessary to consider the limitations encountered by salesmen as they set about plying their trade. One of the most

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<sup>94</sup> Steven Gelber, “Do-it-yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity,” *American Quarterly*, 49, no. 1 (1997), 66.

<sup>95</sup> D. B. Holt and C. J. Thompson, “Man-of-action heroes: The pursuit of heroic masculinity in everyday consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31, (no. 2 2004), 425-440.

<sup>96</sup> John Boyd to OCD, July. 30, 1961, Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Sep-Dec, box 12, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, 1961-1968.

<sup>97</sup> Jake Willis to OCD, Nov. 1, 1961, Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Sep-Dec, box 14, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968.



complete and detailed salesman accounts is from James Byrne, a Detroit-based plywood salesman, who recalled a similar level of public animosity and limitations of selling do-it-yourself survival. For Byrne, selling home shelters was something of a ‘can’t miss proposition,’ with every political statement from the Oval Office and the magazine article in *Life* providing, in his own words, a ‘million-dollar free advert.’<sup>98</sup> The potential profit margins also proved attractive. One Kelsey Hayes’ shelter kit, which came in 73 prefabricated steel sections weighing in at around 150lbs, could be purchased by Byrne at a wholesale price of \$433 and sold for a retail price of \$725.<sup>99</sup> The representative from Kelsey Hayes was quick to point out that not only had the department store Sears, Roebuck and Company already ‘agreed to test-market’ the product, but a ‘national “saturation” advertisement campaign’ was in the works.<sup>100</sup> The ‘quality’ of the product could also, in theory, be trusted. Byrne ‘believed’ the Kelsey Hayes sales agent, who ‘assured’ him that their brand of home shelter was easily built ‘two men could assemble it in two to four hours.’<sup>101</sup> On paper Kelsey Hayes’ shelters provided the perfect vehicle for Byrne to make a profit, perform a patriotic duty, and provide a DIY task any homeowner with basic manual skills and craftsmanship might complete.

Buying fourteen unassembled Kelsey Hayes shelter assembly kits, Byrne sold thirteen to other regional dealers in the State who, like himself, had seen an emerging opportunity in the home shelter market. Keeping one shelter back to act as a model display to

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<sup>98</sup> Alfred Balk, “Anyone for Survival?” *Saturday Evening Post*, Mar. 27, 1965, 74.

<sup>99</sup> *Life*, Sept. 15, 1961, 10.

<sup>100</sup> Letter Marcus Raskin to George McBundy, Oct. 17, 1961, folder 3, box 295, Subject File Civil Defense. JFKL.

<sup>101</sup> Alfred Balk, “Anyone for Survival?” *Saturday Evening Post*, Mar. 27, 1965, 75.

attract buyers, Byrne placed a second order for another fourteen shelter kits.<sup>102</sup> Eagerly anticipating the popularity of his new business venture, Byrne invested \$20,000 into a local advertising campaign, assigned two of his employees to construct one of the model shelters and eagerly waited for customers. The first problem arrived when Byrne found his workmen struggling to put together the model shelter. Rather than taking the two hours claimed by the Kelsey Hayes representative, Byrne's team took ten. The second issue came once the walls were erected. Byrne, looking to reinforce the shelter walls to OCD specifications, which required 'dumping a small mountain of sand – four to five cubic yards – into eight-inch hollows between the walls and ceiling panels,' realized that the task would take an additional ten hours. Faced with a series of complications Byrne started to doubt the validity of the Kelsey Hayes' spokesman's claims. If Byrne and his workers struggled, how was an ordinary homeowner going to overcome these basic construction problems: 'you will be filling a space nearly seven feet high, and there are only a few inches of clearance between the shelter and the basement ceiling ... how are you going to get the sand in there? With a spoon?'<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>103</sup> Alfred Balk, "Anyone for Survival?" *Saturday Evening Post* Mar. 27, 1965, 75



**Figure 3.** James Byrne looks to sell his fallout shelters to the public.  
Alfred Balk, “Anyone for Survival?” *Saturday Evening Post* (27 March 1965)

It is clear from Byrne’s experience that the construction of a Kelsey Hayes’ fallout shelter went far beyond the realms of a typical DIY exercise. The physical act of construction, central to the advertisement of family shelters was a persistent problem, with both salesmen and the public alike struggling to erect their own shelter kits. The failed craftsmanship of the family fallout shelter quickly negated the consumer message of do-it-yourself survival, creating in its place an almost comical narrative of families and salesmen alike trying and failing to build their own shelters. Public letters to the OCD during the week of the Cuban Missile Crisis are littered with accounts of failed shelter construction projects. Issues that homeowners encountered ranged from water leaks, prefabricated walls not fitting in basements, collapsed shelter ceilings and local authorities refusing planning permission. Some Miami residents complained that low lying ground water had made the evacuation of basements almost impossible, while in Ohio a local farmer’s attempt to build a shelter had led

him to strike into a water pipe, flooding his home and creating a local water shortage.<sup>104</sup> Narratives of failed DIY projects quickly supplanted the political ideal that suburban fathers, armed with a host of tools, a shelter construction kit, a sense of patriotic duty and a set of instructions, might be able to provide a meaningful form of domestic security for their families. In place of ‘every home a fortress,’ the OCD was facing at the height of the bomb shelter craze, in the words of its new director Stueart Pittman, ‘a national DIY disaster.’<sup>105</sup>

In the case of James Byrne, despite his personal misgivings, a substantial capital investment was already in place. Still convinced that shelters had the potential to turn a profit, Byrne assigned his best salesman Sal Gorge to recruit a team of door-to-door salesmen to start selling shelters to the suburbanites of Detroit, offering a \$100 commission for every sale made. Not a single shelter was sold. ‘They went out with high hopes,’ Sal recalled, ‘they pointed out how shelters were useful not only as shelters, but also, when paneled, as a spare room, study or photo lab. They really wanted those \$100 commissions.’<sup>106</sup> According to Sal, poor sales were down to two factors. Firstly, the cost of the shelter, with ‘we can’t afford it now’ or ‘we will see how things turn out in Berlin’ featuring as common responses to his sales pitch.<sup>107</sup> The second problem was the message of do-it-yourself survival itself: ‘People listen to the sales pitch, take all the literature’ then ‘ask questions and then just walk away ...

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<sup>104</sup> Summary of Studies of Public Attitudes towards Civil Defense”, Dec. 2, 1961, box 2, Information and Public, RG396, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, 14.

<sup>105</sup> Pittman to Regional OCD Directors, Dec. 18, 1961, box 6 Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968, 2.

<sup>106</sup> Alfred Balk, “Anyone for Survival?” *Saturday Evening Post*, Mar. 27, 1965, 75.

<sup>107</sup> The public ‘ignoring’ shelter sales pitches was a common feature in articles discussing the bomb shelter craze. See Walter Karp, “When Bunkers Last in Backyards Bloomed,” *American Heritage*, February, 1980, 92.

they just didn't buy it.'<sup>108</sup> Even during the Cuban Missile Crisis the public still rejected Byrne's shelters. In October 1962, a day after Kennedy told the nation that missiles had been discovered in Cuba, Sal and Byrne decided to load up the back of a flatbed truck with the model shelter. In a last-ditch attempt to attract sales the salesmen parked the model shelter in 'parking lots, shopping centers and veteran halls', dropped the price by \$100 and posted a display sign 'FALLOUT SHELTERS – WHILE THEY LAST.' Despite a steady stream of foot traffic to the display there was not even a 'nibble of a sale.' 'That shelter was out there day and night unattended ... not so much as a bolt was stolen ... even vandals weren't interested.' Eventually Byrne placed an advert offering shelters free of charge, which was taken up by a family in Westphal Michigan, who took the shelter away. 'Last I heard from them they were having trouble assembling it. But I'm not asking questions.'<sup>109</sup>

Despite these stories of individual salesmen failing to sell do-it-yourself shelter kits, it is important to note that a small subset of shelter companies did have limited success. The reason for the disparity between the successes and failures of shelter firms is difficult to fully discern, partly due to the inflated sales rhetoric we encounter in the testimonies of salesmen, in addition to the scattered nature of private business documentation; however, we can draw some conclusions. Firstly, salesmen such as Frank Norton, Director of the National Shelter Association, and former OCDM director Leo Hoegh reported a profitable year in 1961 in part due to their pre-existing strong institutional contacts. Unlike individual salesmen such as James Byrne, certain shelter salesmen were in frequent correspondence, or had been in the past, with civil defense policymakers themselves, and as such worked through federal

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<sup>108</sup> Balk, "Anyone for Survival?" *Saturday Evening Post*, Mar. 27, 1965, 75.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

channels when plying their trade.<sup>110</sup> The policymaker turned profiteer Leo Hoegh was able to keep his own company Wonder Inc. afloat by staying on the right side of administrative policy and public sentiment by moving from selling individual home shelters to constructing public work shelters in schools. Yet not every successful shelter company had such close institutional affiliations as the former head of the OCD.

Despite the dominance of do-it-yourself rhetoric, those shelter companies that reported limited success did so by taking on the responsibility of home protection themselves. Indeed, the shelter companies who were successful made a profit not in selling construction kits for home owners but by offering their own services as building contractors who, for a fee, could cut out the middle man for the suburban middle class homeowner and build fallout shelters for them. In place of an industry premised on homeowners building shelters, a new service industry developed by private contractors started to take hold. 'For two years I've starved in this business,' noted shelter salesman Douglas Batholow. However, 'since Kennedy's defense talk' his Orlando based company who offered private shelter construction instead of simply selling DIY kits had 'averaged two sales a day at \$2,195.'<sup>111</sup> In contrast to construction kits, sales for shelter construction services, at the tail end of 1961 appeared to be healthy.<sup>112</sup> In Boston, one shelter contractor was 'overwhelmed' with orders and in October of 1961 was turning down \$780 contracts from 'panicky citizens' who asked him to build shelters 'the next day.'<sup>113</sup> Whilst in Sacramento, Atlas Bomb Shelter and its \$5000 to \$6000 OCD-approved six person capacity, 35-ton prefabricated shelters, had proved so successful

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<sup>110</sup> Regulations discussed in internal memo, Nov. 4, 1961, box 1, Executive Correspondence and memo, Records of the Office of Emergency Preparedness (OEP), 1961-1963.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in: "Civil Defense: The Sheltered Life," *Time*, Oct. 20, 1961.

<sup>112</sup> "Boom to Bust," *Time*, May 18, 1962, 20.

<sup>113</sup> Frank Ringer to OCD, Feb. 13, 1962, Correspondence Cards, box 2, OCD.

that little publicity was needed. According to the owner of Atlas Shelters, Frank Ringer, public interest in backyard excavation and shelter construction was such that ‘we haven’t done any advertisement yet, there’s so much demand we hardly keep up with it.’<sup>114</sup>

The narratives of shelter companies during the height of the bomb shelter craze speak of an infant industry, unregulated and out of control, struggling to translate the consumer language of do-it-yourself survival into direct sales by gaining limited success in offering building services. However, the potential market growth in shelter building was quickly overshadowed by a new issue confronting potential buyers of home fallout shelters: namely claims that those shelter salesmen were steeped in fraudulent business practices. By the summer of 1962, honest shelter companies, and salesmen working alongside OCD guidelines were operating in what was steadily becoming publicly discussed as a market run by ‘fly by night’ salesmen, falsely ‘claiming to sell government approved shelters’ operating alongside reputable firms.<sup>115</sup> As highlighted in an issue of *Consumer Report*, one of the biggest problems aside from the issues of the product itself, was the fact that anyone from ‘swimming pool contractors to car dealers ... are claiming to be authorities on bomb shelters.’<sup>116</sup> Reports to the FTC indicated that in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago shelter salesmen were ‘posing as civil defense officials’ to boost faltering sales.<sup>117</sup> By 1962, the biggest issues faced by shelter companies across the United States were not just the usefulness of the product they sold, but their own credibility.

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<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Allan Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom* (Oxford, 1993), 129.

<sup>115</sup> Stuart Pittman Oral History Interview- #2, March. 5, 1983, John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, (Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Mass.).

<sup>116</sup> “Coffins or Shields,” *Time*, Feb. 2, 1962.

<sup>117</sup> Thomas Hagen to Pierre Salinger, Sept. 15, 196, ‘ND2 Civil Defense’, box 595, Subject Files: Civil Defense, 2.

## **‘Suede Shoe Boys’: The decline of the Shelter Salesmen**

At the start of 1962, reports of unscrupulous business practices turned fallout shelter salesmen into a front-page headline. ‘No group of citizens,’ syndicated columnist James ‘Scotty’ Reston wrote for the *New York Times*, ‘is showing more solicitude for the well-being of the nation’ than those salesmen who decided to turn a profit out of national fear.<sup>118</sup> For Reston, the existence of the fallout shelter salesmen exposed the inequality in the federal civil defense program – a government policy that seemingly offered survival to the few who could afford it, favoring ‘the rich over the poor, the single house dweller over the apartment dweller, the homeowner over the renter.’<sup>119</sup> Shelter salesmen, according to Reston, rather than providing a public service, merely offered the gullible homeowner a chance to be ‘evaporated in style.’<sup>120</sup> Reston was not alone in his critique of the commercialization of civil defense. William L. Shirer writing for *Good Housekeeping* saw in the presence of shelter salesmen the ‘true barbarity’ of the family shelter. For Shirer, shelters exposed troubling aspects of class and racial inequality that had long gone unmentioned by OCD spokesmen. With shelter salesmen ‘threatening to make a racket out of the bewilderment of the American people’, Shirer asked the readers of *Redbook*: ‘Are only the well-to-do among us to have a chance of survival?’<sup>121</sup> ‘The entire sales pitch of civil defense,’ Walt Goodman wrote, was based on ‘the happy image of father, mother, children, sitting snugly together in their new convertible games room shelter, first aid kit ready but unused.’ For Goodman, the home

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<sup>118</sup> James Reston, “Those Sweet and Kindly Shelter Builders,” *New York Times*, 12 Nov. 12, 1961, 3.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>120</sup> James Reston, “How to be evaporated in style,” *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 1961.

<sup>121</sup> William L. Shirer, “Let’s Stop the Fallout-Out Shelter Folly!” *Good Housekeeping*, Feb. 1962, 151.



shelter market was ‘based on several grossly inaccurate assumptions.’<sup>122</sup> To a backdrop of public unease, press scrutiny, and a growing distrust of shelter salesmen, the consumer market of civil defense began to decline.

As Kennedy and his New Frontiersmen began to restyle the federal guidelines of civil defense towards collective community shelters and newspaper coverage increasingly painted an industry desperately in need of policing, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) took an active stance on regulating and controlling the home shelter market. Acting after a series of public complaints over shady shelter contractors which had been printed in the letters page of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, the FTC set out to determine who the ‘official shelter manufacturers’ were from those operating ‘outside of OCD guidelines.’<sup>123</sup> The FTC’s primary task was to catalogue the number of shelter firms operating across the United States; however, the FTC federal reach clearly extended beyond the logistics of the shelter market as during the early months of 1962 they launched an investigation into the advertisement of home shelters. The notion of DIY nuclear survival, already out of favor with the New Frontiersmen of the Kennedy White House, was suddenly under a new level of scrutiny from a federal agency that had little vested interest in seeing the shelter market succeed.

Throughout 1962, Paul Rand Dixon, the Chair of the FTC, took a hard line against those salesmen operating outside of OCD approval, dubbed by Los Angeles Civil Defense Director Roy Hoover as ‘suede-shoe boys’.<sup>124</sup> ‘Ideologically, we’re at war with communism,’ Dixon stated, adding that promoting ‘worthless shelters ... comes pretty close to being

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<sup>122</sup> Walt Goodman, *Redbook*, March 1962, 24.

<sup>123</sup> Thomas Hagen to Pierre Salinger, RE: Volume of mail, Aug. 11, 1961, Box 595, Civil Defense, Central Subject Files.

<sup>124</sup> Roy Hoover quoted in Kenneth D. Rose, *One Nation Underground* (New York, 2001), 192.

treason.’<sup>125</sup> Curtailing ‘fraudulent and dangerous advertisement,’<sup>126</sup> Dixon passed two new advertisement guidelines in December of 1961 written, according to a FTC report of the same month, to ‘limit the layman’s language’ to OCD guidelines.<sup>127</sup> Shelter firms caught operating outside of the FTC guidelines faced fines and potential criminal prosecution. The new guidelines were designed to ‘root the exploiters of human fear out of the picture’ and provide ‘a detailed, clear cut and nationwide civil defense program under the leadership of the federal government.’<sup>128</sup>

The tightening of FTC guidelines on shelter adverts illustrated a new level of sophistication in the federal government’s approach to the question of civil defense. However, this additionally tells us something critical about the changing governmental approach to placing survival into the hands of private businesses. As Helen Tangiers argues, city and town officials played a vital role in controlling the public markets of their communities.<sup>129</sup> The moral economy of the shelter business exhibited a similar pattern, one in which unscrupulous and exploitative market practices highlighted the failure of government to provide meaningful civil defense welfare to its population. The shift from private to public models of community protection can be attributed to what Meg Jacobs and Lizabeth Cohen identify as the complex role consumer citizenship plays in the politics of national security.

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<sup>125</sup> Speech at the Chicago Better Business Bureau, Nov. 14, 1961, box 005, Papers of the Federal Trade Commission, Paul Rand Dixon Papers, 1961- 1963, JFKL.

<sup>126</sup> Advertising Alert, Aug. 12, 1961, box 003, Papers of the Federal Trade Commission.

<sup>127</sup> FTC ruling December 1961, The Code of Federal Regulations of the United States of America, Annual Report, box 001, Series 1, Papers of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC),13.

<sup>128</sup> Congressional Hearing: House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, Aug. 22, 1961, box 005, FTC, 335.

<sup>129</sup> Helen Tangerines *Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (2003).

The shelter business aligns with Jacob's model of economic citizenship, providing a fledgling industry built from post-war consumer politics that encouraged 'state-building from the bottom up' as 'policymakers acted on behalf of the "consuming public"'.<sup>130</sup> Yet on closer inspection, the growing cultural rejection of home shelters supports Cohen's argument that grassroots consumer activism played a vital role in drawing federal interest to a community welfare issue they might choose to ignore.<sup>131</sup> Even within the OCD, private shelter companies working with trade associations were no longer the 'solution' to public engagement with civil defense.<sup>132</sup>

We can see this in practice by examining the attitudes of the more media-savvy advisors of the Kennedy administration who championed a shift from private to community shelters. During a Hyannis Port Thanksgiving meeting in 1961, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who had been steadily collecting a box of negative shelter coverage, advised Kennedy that he must realign the administration's position on nuclear security with the post-war liberal consensus in mind, stating that the question of 'shelter ownership has turned ugly'.<sup>133</sup> Schlesinger advised against any further presidential endorsement of DIY shelters, and civil defense must be as framed as a form of community welfare. Following Schlesinger's recommendation, Robert McNamara and Stuart Pittman set out to extend federal funding of civil defense by an additional \$700 million, earmarking new grants for 'non-profit health, educational, and welfare institutions that would construct public shelters big enough to house

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<sup>130</sup> Meg Jacobs *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (2005), 5.

<sup>131</sup> Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*.

<sup>132</sup> Draft memo for Civil Defense booklet (undated), box W04, Folder 3 draft statements Classified Subject Files: Civil Defense, draft statements for Civil Defense booklet, 2. JFKL.

<sup>133</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Reflections on Civil Defense" box 295, Civil Defense 12/61, National Security Files, JFKL. 1.

at least fifty people of up to \$25 per shelter space'.<sup>134</sup> In addition Kennedy confirmed that the national shelter survey, designed to identify and stock potential public shelter spaces, was to drive policy going forward, resulting in the official sanction of fallout shelter signs being placed on public buildings, such as schools or hospitals throughout the United States.

David Monteyne astutely describes this shift in federal discussions of shelters as part of the 'Democrat approach to civil defence'.<sup>135</sup> During the previous Republican administration, family shelters and the gospel of self-help had satisfied both popular concerns over military control of federal agencies and conservative hostility towards the notion that a massive federal investment in civil defence and new housing developments paved the way towards an expensive militarised New Deal.<sup>136</sup> Public backlash to the selling of shelters had done much to dissuade that vision. Psychiatrist Charles Fritz of the National Academy of Science Disaster Research Group summarised this shift in civil defence discourse by advocating that policymakers 'must stop thinking of American society as if it were simply a collection of individuals and families who are individually responsible for the defence of the homeland. The realistic unit of administration and management in a nuclear attack is the nation as a whole'.<sup>137</sup> By the middle of 1962, with tension escalating over Cuba and the politics of civil defense changing, the consumer message of do-it-yourself survival appeared to be increasingly unsustainable.

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<sup>134</sup> "First oral history interview with Steuart L. Pittman" (18 September 1970), John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, JFKL, 6.

<sup>135</sup> Monteyne, *Designing for Civil Defence in the Cold War*, 36.

<sup>136</sup> McEnaney, *Civil Defence Begins at Home*, 20.

<sup>137</sup> Charles E. Fritz quoted in David Allison, "Fallout Shelters at Once", *Architectural Forum* (February 1961), 127.

Predictably, the hardening of the FTC's guidelines on shelters had an immediate impact on the commercial prospects of shelter companies. Firstly, OCD sponsored public shelter exhibits that had been commonplace at State Fairs, shopping malls and veteran centers in 1961, declined rapidly by March of 1962 when the FTC guidelines took effect. In September of 1961 families visiting Prince George Mall in Washington D.C. were greeted to a 'recording of air raid sirens and exploding bombs' and a looped recording of an 'anguished male voice' that shouted over the tannoy: 'My wife, my children ... if I'd only listen to civil defense ... I'd be in that shelter now.' By the summer of 1962, OCD sponsored public exhibitions on a similar scale were almost non-existent, replaced by an emphasis on locating and identifying public spaces that might act as safety zones.<sup>138</sup> Additionally, private shelter contractors caught operating outside the new FTC guidelines now faced increasingly harsh legal repercussions. In Florida, the Orlando based firm Survival Shelters was forced to cease operations in March of 1962 after local residents reported that the company had used the official civil defense emblem on its promotional material without OCD authorization.<sup>139</sup> According to OCD officials, Survival Shelters' sales pamphlets were specifically 'designed to give the impression that the Government had approved of the product' and as such 'must be taken out of circulation immediately.'<sup>140</sup> However, for the residents of Orlando, the damage to the reputation of local civil defense efforts was already done.

By the fall of 1962, reports of 'suede shoe' salesmen began to drown out positive coverage of reputable shelter firms. Publications with a history of criticizing civil defense, notably *The New Republic*, *Newsweek*, *Nation* and *Commonweal*, published articles filled

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<sup>138</sup> "Survival are shelters the answer?" *Newsweek*, Nov. 6, 1961, 19.

<sup>139</sup> Information Bulletin, Sept. 22, 1961, box MF01, FTC, 3.

<sup>140</sup> Report: Survival Shelters, July. 1, 1962, Mobilization and Manpower Region 7, box 4, Subject Records of the Office of Defense Mobilization.

with anecdotes of ‘gullible homeowners’ paying \$850 for shelters that cost \$180.<sup>141</sup> Casting shelter salesmen as the true ‘racketeers’ of the Cold War, homeowners purchasing shelters often appeared within these articles as ‘neurotic men’, tricked into making an anxiety purchase that offered little in the way of actual family safety.<sup>142</sup> The image of the ‘tricked’ homeowner purchasing a faulty shelter repeatedly surfaced in the prelude to the Cuban Missile Crisis, frequently in conjunction with stories of OCD officials inspecting do-it-yourself shelters only to find them unsafe. One account from *Consumer Report* recounted how an OCD officer had inspected a \$5000-dollar shelter only to deem it a ‘potential tomb.’<sup>143</sup> Taken together these articles fueled the perception that shelter owners were not responsible male consumers but were instead individuals taking part in an activity that was at best ‘ludicrous’ and at worst ‘immoral.’<sup>144</sup>

Accounts of homeowners deceived by shelter salesmen were not just the subject of media sensationalism and similar accounts can be found in public correspondence during the height of the shelter craze. Unsurprisingly, members of the public who had been sold shelters by sales representatives claiming to speak on behalf of the federal government were quick to register their complaints. In Long Island, Arthur L. Doolittle wrote directly to President Kennedy following his experience with the Port Jefferson based shelter firm U.S. Fallout Shelter Inc. Mr. Doolittle, having contacted his local shelter company after seeing an

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<sup>141</sup> Margaret Mead, “Are Shelter’s the Answer?” *New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 26, 1961; “The Paradox of Civil Defense,” *Commonweal*, March 1962; I.F. Stone, “Civil Defense Madness,” *Weekly*, November, 1961; Linus Pauling, “Shelter Muddle,” *Dissent*, October, 1961; “Shelter’s and Survival: A Report on Civil Defense”, *New Republic*, November, 1961.

<sup>142</sup> Norman Cousins, Shelter, Survival and Common Sense, *Saturday Review*, Oct. 21, 1961, 25.

<sup>143</sup> “Enter the Survival Merchants,” *Consumer Report*, 27, no.1, January 1962, 47.

<sup>144</sup> Margaret Mead, “Are Shelter’s the Answer?” *New York Times Magazine* Nov. 26, 1961.

‘advertisement in the local newspaper, *Newsday*, about a shelter for \$495 which was civil defense approved,’ was promptly visited by a sales representative claiming to ‘speak on behalf of the government.’<sup>145</sup> The salesman told the family that the \$495 shelter model was unsuitable, due to a ‘high roentgen count from living so close to New York City.’<sup>146</sup> Claiming to be an expert on all civil defense matters the salesmen confidently informed the family that their best option was converting the home cellar into an underground shelter – a service U.S. Fallout Shelter Inc. could supply for \$2200. Balking at the cost, Arthur Doolittle told the salesmen they could not afford it. The sales representative appealed to the paternal responsibility of Arthur, ‘their argument was that, as a husband, the safety of my wife and children should come first.’ Convinced by the sales pitch, the Doolittles agreed to a lower price, paying \$1250 for a shelter to be built in their cellar. Despite taking out an FHA loan to pay for the shelter the construction was never completed. Once the frame of the shelter was placed in the cellar the owners of U.S. Fallout Shelter Inc. came to visit the construction site ‘stating that it was not built correctly and they would fix it ... Needless to say no one came around to fix it.’<sup>147</sup> When the family tried to contact the company they were informed that the U.S. Fallout Shelter Inc. had ‘disconnected its phone line.’ Even official channels seemed to be at a loss as to what the Doolittles might do to recoup their losses, with Arthur stating that both the Better Business Bureau and the Civil Defense Officer for Long Island were unable to provide any information. ‘We are a family of patriots,’ Arthur Doolittle wrote, ‘we went ahead with the shelter, and we felt we were acting as good Americans.’

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<sup>145</sup> Doolittle to OCD Nov. 4, 1961, box 12, Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, Office of Civil Defense, Central Files 1961-1968, 1.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 3.

Aside from delegitimizing the fallout shelter as a consumer product, the experiences of American fathers ‘duped,’ as one St Louis resident stated, into buying useless or incomplete home shelters, directly challenged the consumer ideal of the fallout shelter owner as a savvy post-war male consumer.<sup>148</sup> By 1962 the message of civil defense, with its affirmation of individualism and self-reliance, had started to yield to a much more uncomfortable reality in which a business class was seemingly exploiting the fears of a nation. The motives of individual shelter salesmen such as James Cline, who had decided to sell shelters out of a sense of national service were quickly forgotten, replaced with stories of shelter salesmen posing as civil defense officials to make a quick sale.<sup>149</sup>

Just as quickly as they appeared, the shelter sales representatives seemingly vanished. Through 1963, business ventures that had opened the doors of new fallout divisions just as quickly closed them down: often with owners complaining in local papers about a year of lost revenue. The housing market and realtors experienced a similar sudden transition, with the family fallout shelter quickly disappearing almost overnight. However, shelter salesmen left their mark on the language of Cold War national security. On a policy level, the consumer culture of home survival had gathered such an extensive public backlash that through the rest of the Cold War no other president endorsed the building of private shelters. In his drafted, but never publicly delivered statement ‘Fireside Chat on Civil Defense’, Kennedy openly reflected on this transition, stating the remarkable impact the shelter sales

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<sup>148</sup> Letter: author unknown, Nov. 6. 1961, Shelters and Vulnerability Reduction Sep-Dec, box 14, Record of the Defense Preparedness Agency, OCD, Central Files 1961-1968.

<sup>149</sup> Alfred Balk, “Anyone for Survival?” *Saturday Evening Post*, Mar. 27, 1965, 75.



representatives had on homeland security: ‘we are not going to permit unscrupulous men to racketeer on people’s anxieties over nuclear war’.<sup>150</sup>

By the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, shelter owners themselves had started to attract a substantial level of criticism. From reports of men stockpiling shelters with weapons and ammunition and embracing a survivalist mentality, to protests on Ivy League campuses across the United States, the family fallout shelter embodied, in the words of Walter Lippmann, the ‘evil of each family for himself and the devil take the hindmost.’<sup>151</sup> When it collapsed, the home shelter market seemed to vanish almost as quickly as it had appeared. Companies that had open fallout shelter divisions quietly closed their doors and went back to their original purposes. Despite a week of intense public engagement with civil defense during the October Missile Crisis, a lack of administrative statements coupled with the increasing focus on community survival, meant that rather than a revival of survival, salesmen were met with consumer rejection, indifference and increasingly faltering sales. Those private enterprises that did not fold started to rebrand themselves. Companies selling fallout shelters, especially within the Mid-West, were quick to rebrand their products as ‘tornado or hurricane shelters’. By the start of 1963, 600 shelter companies nationwide had filed for bankruptcy.<sup>152</sup> The market for the family shelter was dead.

## **Salesmen and Survival**

During 1963, one of the most popular stand-up routines for the Chicago-based comedy group Second City was ‘The Fallout Shelter Salesmen.’ The performance followed the antics of a

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<sup>150</sup> Fireside Chat on Civil Defense”, Box 30 Subject File Civil Defense, Theodore Sorensen Personal Papers, JFKL, 1.

<sup>151</sup> Walter Lippmann, “Mistaken Fallout Shelter Scare,” *St. Louis Dispatch*, Nov. 15, 1961.

<sup>152</sup> Alfred Balk, “Anyone for Survival?” *Saturday Evening Post* Mar. 27, 1965, 75.

fictional shelter company, Acme Fallout Shelters, and its owner's attempts to train three 'aspiring' shelter salesmen.<sup>153</sup> As the scene develops, it becomes clear that one of the sellers is much more 'adept' at selling survival than the others. Not only was the salesman more than happy to offer a 'money back guarantee' to any family whose shelter did not survive a direct nuclear blast, but he was 'willing to throw in a free machine gun' to help keep those 'pesky' neighbors away. The routine, a 'guaranteed crowd pleaser' in the underground comedy clubs of Chicago and later New York City, illustrates how by 1963 the family fallout shelter had become something of a national joke.<sup>154</sup>

From a nationwide talking point to an object of counter-cultural satire, the fallout shelter salesman occupies a unique place in the cultural and political imagination of the Cold War. Yet the sharp rise and fall of the home shelter market over the course of two years was far more than a simple narrative of failed expectations, inflated sales rhetoric, and unscrupulous business practices. In the thoroughly imperfect relation between private business and civil defense officials, the political consequences of selling survival were on full display. In the failure to sell survival, consumer incentives were unable to facilitate public engagement with the imperatives of the security state. For Elaine Tyler May, security and democracy in the modern age is rooted in the 'principles of individualism, unfettered capitalism, the sanctity of the home, and a suspicion of outsiders that gained salience in the early Cold War'.<sup>155</sup> Yet, the history of the home shelter complicates how historians read the role of consumerism within national security by pointing to a persistent rejection of the

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<sup>153</sup> "Shelter Salesmen," Second City Revue, January 1963, videotape of *Second City New York*, WNEW-TV.

<sup>154</sup> For more on Second City, see: Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Post War America* (Chicago, 2010).

<sup>155</sup> Elaine Tyler May, 'Security against Democracy: The Legacy of the Cold War at Home' *Journal of American History* Vol 97. No 4 (2011), 956.

promise of private enterprise at the expense of public good. Here, it is useful to turn to Molly Geidel's characterization of development during the early 1960s. For Geidel, the agenda of nation building, modernization and development is best understood in terms of a 'fantasy' created by policymakers and, in her study of the Peace Corps, stimulated by volunteers throughout the developing world to protect American capitalism abroad by controlling non-white populations.<sup>156</sup> Closer to home the domestic shelter market another "failed fantasy" of Cold War development and manifesting in the inability of shelter salesmen to close a deal.

From a contemporary standpoint, to dismiss shelter salesmen as simple indications of the wider insecurities, paranoias and irrationalities is to view them as caricatures of the Cold War home-front. Indeed, wedding the principles of consumerism to the promise of nuclear survival seems so absurd that perhaps it is not all that surprising that even the best sellers never truly succeed. But, the fact that at the very height of nuclear tensions attempts were made to outsource security policy to local enterprise attests to the level of faith policymakers had in capitalist consumer principles for providing a solution to geopolitical problems. In the context of the wider history of Cold War business and capitalism, shelter salesmen provide an antidote to the accepted wisdom that the domestic Cold War is defined by the inevitable triumph of capitalist interests. The domestic shelter market faltered and stuttered precisely because the consumerist ethos of home survival came to symbolize the true excesses of amoral capitalism. Salesmen failed to recast the Cold War homeowner as defender of the nation, good citizen, or even effective consumer. But their failure also profoundly impacted the language of domestic security itself. Through periods of escalating nuclear anxiety into the 1980s, Republican policymakers working for Ronald Reagan never pushed forward a

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<sup>156</sup> Molly Geidel, *Peace Corps Fantasies: How Development shaped the Global Politics of the Sixties* (Minneapolis, 2015).

strategy that implied that private business can provide a meaningful replacement for state-controlled national security. It is debatable whether the United States has or will ever be, in the words of one salesman, ‘a nation of shelter builders just waiting for the push’.<sup>157</sup> Nevertheless, in the stagnation of the domestic market of home shelters historians can spot a transitional moment in the history of national security that deserves our consideration. Faced with the intimate and immediate prospect of total annihilation, the nation never embraced the idea that survival in war might ever be consumer choice.

### **Author Biography:**

Tom Bishop is a lecturer in American History at the University of Lincoln. He completed his PhD in American Studies and History at the University of Nottingham in 2016. He is currently editing his first book, ‘Every Home a Fortress: The Fallout Shelter Father in Cold War America’ under contract with the University of Massachusetts Press. In 2019 he will be an AHRC Kluge Fellowship in the library of Congress researching his next project on Southern Activism and Nuclear Power in the 1980s.

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<sup>157</sup> Alfred Balk, “Anyone for Survival?” *Saturday Evening Post*, Mar. 27, 1965, 75.